

Lesson One

The Church in the First Century: The Concept

Text: Matthew 16:17-19

When we use the word *church* today, many (in some regions *most*) people think, “That is the place Christians go on Sunday.” If we are fortunate, those people have a neutral impression of the *church*—they do not regard Christians as being good or bad. It is fortunate because there are no negative images to be faced before the gospel is shared with them. If we are very fortunate, those people have a good impression of the *church*—they regard Christians as a blessing to the community at large. Unfortunately, many people have a negative view of the *church* and Christians who attend *churches*—many Christians would be shocked to hear how negatively they are regarded by many average, non-religious people.

The easiest thing for Christians to do is to react to what they regard as unjust criticism. Our basic reaction is some form of this: “How dare we be regarded as a negative influence in the community? How can anyone look at all we do as the *church*, and view Christians negatively?”

Do you like everyone who is a Christian? Honestly? Do you differentiate between good and bad Christians? On what basis? Do you regard some *church* arguments as petty? Why? Do you abhor Christians that act one way in *church* and quite another outside the assembly? Can you sensibly follow all the different rules that exist from one *church* (congregation) to another? If such matters are problems for Christians in the *church*, why would we think such is not even more confusing for those who have been without spiritual influence for at least two generations? Do you realize how many teens and adults can say, “To find a person who regularly attended *church* in my family, you have to go beyond my grandparents.”

Consider what non-religious people see on a too common basis. They see priests sexually molesting children. They see televangelists assuring people their souls will be saved if they will send money. They hear preachers say people can receive healing if they will give generously. They are assured the gospel is the avenue to wealth for the poor. They see divisions of congregations. They hear people who go to *church* creatively ask the non-religious to bail the *church* out of a financial crisis. They see Christians who regard *church* affairs as business opportunities.

Yes, we Christians know all Christians are not like that. Yet, those are some of the things the non-religious see and hear. Consider some things Christians need to realize: (a) If salvation is for the troubled, salvation will be a messy affair. It will never be a nice, clean, clear contrast effort. Spirituality is a growth and maturing process that never stops. (b) The ultimate expressions of good never reside in people. They always reside in the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father (who Christ represents). (c) Human failures are human failures, not divine failures. (d) Christian goals in our dedication to holy lifestyles are an unachievable commitment given by God, not a human accomplishment. (e) Though we seek human perfection in Christ, the person who considers self perfect will be a great spiritual disappointment. (f) Pretended humility is not a virtue.

Christians need to exercise thoughtful care in presenting the gospel to people with no religious background (they surely need hope in Christ, but we need to be careful about the promises we make for God and the spiritual expectations we generate). We need to be certain we present Jesus Christ as God's message, not our human religious views and desires. Christians need to exercise great care not to give non-religious people wrong impressions or incorrect expectations.

We have entered a period of two distinct spiritual needs. (a) We need to promote spiritual growth and development among those who have accepted Jesus Christ [edification]. (b) We need to be understandable as we attract those out of Jesus Christ to Jesus Christ [evangelism]. Those are not the same thing. Those who come to Christ are expected to develop in Christ. In the New Testament, there are more letters that focus on Christian growth than letters that focus on evangelism. (That is NOT to suggest that evangelism is unimportant, but to declare that the spiritual maturing of Christians is a valid, divine concern. Churches filled with spiritual infants do not achieve God's purposes in Jesus Christ.)

It is amazing to honestly examine the vocabulary of the *church* today. Consider just a few words: *church*; salvation; sin; holy; sanctification; redemption, baptism; Christian . . . whatever. How many of those words are used in a non-Christian context? Just consider the word *church*. "That is a lovely *church*." "The *church* is located at such and such address." "They are members of a fabulous *church*." "I invited six people to attend *church* with me." Then there are phrases like "going to *church*; the *church* disillusioned me; you need to make the *church* aware of the need; communication in the *church*; *church* appointments; etc.

So what is the *church*? A building? A street address? A place? A civic organization? An economic opportunity? A people? Or, is it merely a part of the unique Christian vocabulary? Without a lengthy discussion on the biblical concept of one *church*, can you see how confusing the situation is for a non-religious person who is not a Christian, has no desire to be a Christian, and comes from a non-religious background?

The primary usage of *church* in scripture referred to a people who came to Jesus Christ to adopt the lifestyle and values he taught. The word *church* is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. It was a common word with a common meaning that was used in everyday situations. It simply meant "the called out." Thus, anytime people were "called out" of the general population to serve a special purpose or function they could be called *church*. There is indication of this common usage in scripture when the Israelites leaving Egypt were referred to as "the *church* in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, KJV—most English translations translate *ekklesia* in that location as congregation or assembly).

Basically, *church* in the New Testament referred to people who accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and wished to live in him by his values as they pursued God's will.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss the word *church* as a negative, neutral, or positive word.
2. What do non-religious people see or hear on a too common basis?

3. List the six things that Christians need to realize (as given in this lesson).
4. Discuss the care Christians should consider in presenting the gospel to people with little religious background.
5. Give two distinct spiritual needs. Why are both needs essential?
6. Use the word *church* to illustrate the confusion the Christian vocabulary can create among non-religious people.
7. In the New Testament, what did the word *church* typically mean?

Lesson Two

The Paradox

Text: John 17:12-16

The text for today's lesson does not include *ekklesia* or the English translation *church*. The text is actually a part of a prayer prayed by Jesus the last day (perhaps the last night) of his earthly ministry prior to his arrest. His statement is specifically prayed for those men who would serve as the resurrected Jesus' apostles. This request on behalf of these men is based on the same concept of *church*. He prayed they would be *in* the world but not *of* the world—very much the concept of *church* (people who are called "out of the world" to live "in Jesus Christ" by embracing God's values as they exist to do God's will).

In this request that Jesus made to God the Father on behalf of the men who would serve as his apostles, there are two paradoxes you are asked to consider. Paradox #1 focused on Jesus' joy (my joy) declared in verse 13. Jesus said he was coming to God, and he had informed these men of God's values and purposes—for the purpose of giving them his joy.

The concept of joy when combined with all that would happen in the next 24 hours was strange!

Jesus is within a few hours of his arrest, his physical torture, and his death. History declared that all these men but one was killed because they served Jesus Christ. The one who was not killed endured exile. In no way did Jesus or his apostles live desirable physical lives. How could Jesus know what was before him physically (John 17:1, 4, 5) and understand the physical destiny of these men (John 17:14) and speak of joy?

Please note this joy had nothing to do with physical experience. The joy involved an experience that was beyond the physical. A good physical reality and the accompanying physical experiences were not a key to having Jesus' joy. A good physical reality still today is not the key to Jesus' joy!

Paradox #2 is the "*in* but not *of*" concept in John 17:15, 16. Jesus had no desire to take these men out of a world that would misunderstand and kill them. Jesus loved them with unquestionable love, and he would not resent them even when they ran from him shortly. Yet, he wanted them to represent God in this rebellious world in spite of the consequences.

In a powerful statement, Jesus declared to his disciples in Matthew 5:13-16 that they were to be God's light and salt in a world that rebelled against God's influence. To grasp the power of this statement, we must visit that world. Let's begin with salt. Salt was one of the few preservatives available to their world. There was no refrigeration or canning. Freezers did not exist, and there were no Mason jars, can lids, or pressure cookers. Furthermore, their lack of quality control in food stuffs would be appalling by many of today's standards. Meager food supplies often meant people had to eat what was available. Salt was one of the few things they had that could improve the taste of poor quality food.

Consider light and darkness. Begin by realizing all the things that could not be done without light. First, understand there were no petroleum distillates available—no lamp oil, no kerosene,

no man-made (by modern technology) means of providing lighting. If you were rich you might afford torch sticks, but very few were rich. The lamps of most people were small and operated with wicks in olive oil. They provided such a dim light they had to occupy an elevated place in a room to keep people from stumbling. Second, understand most people went to bed shortly after dark. Night travel was dangerous! There were no batteries, no flashlights, no streetlights, no store lights, and no parking lot lights—in short there was no common means of seeing at night! The sun went down, and people went to bed. The sun came up, and people begin working. Why? The sun provided light—they could see! Without sunlight, they could not see how to do things!

In the first century, a discussion of salt and light was a discussion of essentials. Today, we take both salt and light for granted. To them, both were critically essential. To achieve God's purposes in this world, Jesus' disciples are essential. Without those who are Jesus' disciples, there is no light in a black world of darkness, no salt for bad-tasting food. Without Jesus' disciples, the world's decaying food tastes terrible in a hopelessness that dreads death.

A critical truth: JESUS' DISCIPLES MUST LOOK LIKE JESUS' DISCIPLES, AND NOT THE UNPRESERVED WORLD OF DARKNESS. If we look and act like the dark, unpreserved, rotting world, we cannot be God's light and salt!

Years ago I was teaching Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. An active member of the congregation expressed major dissatisfaction with the parable and its lesson. Why? The prodigal son "had all the fun while the older brother had none—he just stayed at home and did his duty." The parable's point was missed! The prodigal son did not have "fun"—he experienced life's misery, not life's joy. When Christians conclude "fun" is found in darkness, they do not understand discipleship with its hope.

The hopelessness of "fun in a dark, unpreserved world" profoundly affected my life. I have spent too many hours seeking to console people whose life is in tatters or helping people find hope in the midst of their disgust with themselves and people. In the world's fun, there is no hope—only consequences that terrify life. The world's pleasure and escape are temporary and often deceiving. Aging results in fearful questions that produce terrible answers. The world's "fun" produces consequences that leave a bitter taste that lingers. For God to extend forgiveness is one thing. It is quite another to forgive yourself.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Does today's text include ekklesia? Then why use it as a text?
2. What is the first paradox Jesus used in John 17:12-16? Why was it a paradox?
3. You are asked to note what in regard to this joy?
4. What is Jesus' second paradox in this text?
5. In Matthew 5:13-16, discuss salt as a preservative and a flavoring for food.

6. What two things are you asked to note about light.
7. Discuss the importance of sunlight in the first century world.
8. Salt and light were what in the first century world?
9. State the critical truth given in this lesson.
10. What is absent is what the world calls “fun”?

Lesson Three

Multiple Religious Uses of “Church” as People Who Belong to God

Texts: Acts 8:1-3; Ephesians 5:23-32

In this lesson the focus will be on the New Testament’s use of the word “church” in regard to the men and women who belong to and follow Jesus Christ as he directs us to God (John 14:6).

First, look at the contrast of Acts 8:1-3 and Ephesians 5:23-32. Act 8:1-3 concerns the “church” in one particular place—Jerusalem. Ephesians 5:23-32 concerns Jesus’ headship over all his people in all congregations (also see Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18). In the New Testament the “church” can refer to followers of Jesus Christ in one place or in numerous places who have differing cultures. It is used to refer to (in our concepts) a congregation of Christians or numerous congregations of Christians.

Second, note Jesus did not use the word “church” much in the four gospels included in the New Testament. Jesus’ usage of “church” in the New Testament gospels is confined to Matthew 16:17-19 and 18:15-20. Jesus’ ministry was basically to the Jewish people (Matthew 10:5, 6; 15:21-28; Acts 13:44-46). In the New Testament gospels, Jesus was more likely to use the concept of kingdom, though Jesus acknowledged people who were not Jews would be in that kingdom (Matthew 10:10-12). Most of the uses of “church” are found in Acts and the epistles.

Third, all Christians everywhere look to Jesus Christ for guidance and direction. Only he is the head of Christians on earth. All living Christians everywhere are a part of and compose collectively his body on earth—in spite of differences in language and customs expressed in procedures. Jesus Christ is not restrained by differences in language or ways of doing things. Those things may challenge us, but they do not challenge the Lord of all who are in Christ.

How did Jesus Christ envision men and women who would be his disciples? How did he see people who would be subjects and citizens in God’s kingdom? Did he think in terms of an institution that was controlled by a human CEO or a group of humans who acted collectively as a CEO group? Did he think in terms of a democratic government where everyone was a law to himself or herself? Did he think in terms of correct and incorrect procedures that represented his preferred culture? Was he interested in controlling human behavior or producing a people of faith? Would people follow him out of a sense of fearful obligation or be overwhelmed by his loving forgiveness?

Consider some things as you ponder this essential question. One, the message of the writings in the New Testament made sense (were understandable) to the people to whom those writings were sent. They were not written to make sense centuries later to peoples and in a world those people could not imagine. The better we understand the Mediterranean world of the first century, the better we will understand the context and meaning of those writings. The old adage that “they mean what they say and say what they mean” usually declared scripture meant what the teacher or commenter thought. The issue was, “How informed was the thought presented?”

Two, they understood a rule by kings who must be obeyed, but the modern forms of democracy did not exist. Never in the “church” was any human called the king. Nor was there a neat form

of hierarchy that existed to control the “church” as was and is often the case in the “church” through the centuries.

Third, the industrial revolution with its manufacturing processes had not occurred. The concept of a CEO or a group of CEOs was not in their thought process. That may be the way we think, but it was not the way they thought.

Fourth, little is said about controlling others as today we think of religious control. Much is said about having faith in Jesus Christ and being motivated by that faith.

Fifth, there is much emphasis on being guided by God’s values as Christians made choices and exercised behavior decisions. Christians were urged to be God’s people, not to seek to control harsh situations. Consider 1 Peter 2:11-3:17.

Sixth, rarely was fear used as a motivation for accepting the good news concerning Jesus. People became disciples in the joy of deliverance, not because they were afraid of hell. Hell is real, and eternal accountability is certain. Jesus is the means of living before God in hope rather than fear. Early Christians were people filled with hope, not terror.

Early congregations cared for Christians and respected people—even those who did not believe in Jesus (Galatians 6:10). They did good works all the time wherever they were—at home or elsewhere. They were God’s light, salt, and yeast in all circumstances. They learned that being an individual who behaved by God’s values was bigger than language, bigger than procedures, bigger than ways of doing things, and bigger than cultures. Being God’s “church” locally and worldwide was a devotion of joyful hope, not a matter of fearful privation.

How pitiful it is that those who are God’s people through the risen Jesus are seen as those who declare, “You are headed for hell! Come be a part of us, and we will teach you how to really feel like guilty failures!” The risen Jesus, our Lord and King, died to give us the privilege of existing in the joy of an indestructible hope!

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is the focus of this lesson?
2. Give the basic contrast between Acts 8:1-3 and Ephesians 5:23-32.
3. Discuss Jesus’ use of the word “church” in the New Testament gospels.
4. All Christians everywhere look to Jesus for what?
5. Discuss ways of looking at men and women who are Jesus’ disciples.
6. What six things were you asked to think about?
7. What did early congregations do?

8. Where were early Christians God's light, salt, and yeast?

9. What is pitiful?

10. Why did the risen Jesus die for us?

Lesson Four

The “Church” Was People!

Texts: Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22; 11:26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4; 15:22; 18:22; 20:28

The writing named Acts in the New Testament makes it obvious that the “church” was people. The whole church could fear (Acts 5:11). The church in Jerusalem could be persecuted (Acts 8:1) and could be ravaged (Acts 8:3) by entering houses and dragging men and women to prison. The church (multiple places) enjoyed [literally, “was having”] peace and could be built up (9:31). News reached [literally, was heard in] the ears of the Jerusalem church (11:22). Barnabas and Saul could meet with [or were gathered together with] the church for the purpose of teaching large numbers (11:26). Herod mistreated some of those who belonged to the church (12:1), and the church prayed for Peter (12:5). The Antioch church included prophets and teachers (13:1). Barnabas and Paul (Saul) appointed elders in the churches they established, prayed and fasted with them, and commended them to the Lord (14:23). Barnabas and Paul reported to the church after they gathered them (14:27). The church at Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul on their way (15:3), and these men were received by the church in Jerusalem (15:4). The whole church agreed with the apostles’ and elders’ decision (15:22). The church could be greeted (18:22) and shepherded (20:28). Acts defines “church” with the acts of people. Those people who followed Jesus Christ were the church whether they were gathered or not. They were a community of people who belonged to Jesus Christ and who looked to Jesus Christ for guidance and direction.

For decades—maybe longer—there has existed the tendency for Christians to see themselves as one spiritual reality, and the church as another. Christians see themselves “as a part of the church” when they agree or are pleased with “the church,” but as not a part of “the church” when they disagree with “the church” or are not pleased with “the church.” There is a Christian “we” and an institution called “the church.” Some even hold the concept there are “Christians,” and there is “the church”—as though the two are not the same thing. In this view, “Christians” are individuals and “the church” is an “institution.”

This concern is better understood through illustrations than through statements. For an example, consider the statement, “I am going to church,” or, “My family goes to church.” (This is not about “approved words and statements.” It is about concepts. Words and statements can be changed, and concepts can remain even with those changes.) Any statement that uses some form of the expression of “going to church” runs a significant risk of either giving or endorsing the impression that “church” and “being a Christian” are two separate things. “Church” does not necessarily have anything to do with what one is. One can be a Christian and have no association with the church. Or, perhaps the concept that “church” is a place, an address, or a building. It is something outside of or aside from the Christian.

Consider another illustration. Consider the “we” and “they” or the “I” and “them” language often used by Christians in a congregation. If Christians are displeased, “they” decided to do that. If Christians are pleased, “we” did that (though the person or persons speaking may have had no actual involvement). After years of preaching, I still cannot determine who this mysterious floating “they” are.

In the last few decades, many Christians have lost a sense of community. Consider the first congregation, the church in Jerusalem, in Acts 6. Evidently, the apostles had been in charge of seeing that the needy were fed (6:2). The responsibility became so large, the apostles had insufficient time to teach (remember, there were no printed New Testaments). The apostles recommended 7 men be selected to oversee the task. This involved a huge transition in the way the congregation did things! Something 12 apostles directed was to be overseen by 7 men.

Note several things. (a) Though the church was large—3000 in Acts 2:41, plus daily additions in 2:47, plus multitudes of men and women in 5:14, and plus continual teaching in 5:42—the church maintained a strong sense of community (consider 4:32-37). (b) It was their devotion to each other that produced the first problem. (c) The men selected were to be spiritual persons. They were selected by the congregation. Their names suggest the 7 selected came from those who were unhappy. (d) It was appropriate for the apostles to be free to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of word.

Those first Christians had much to learn! So do we! In an increasingly secular society that is increasingly failing in forming and sustaining relationships, Christians/the church need to be a people who are the example of forming and sustaining relationship. We in truth need to be a community bound together by devotion to Jesus Christ.

It seems that Christians spend more time in disagreeing and finding fault with each other than they spend in seeking tolerance and understanding. In the first century, the gap between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians often was enormous. The gap between disagreeing Christians often is still enormous. The bridge across the gap of differences is constructed of the materials of (a) eyes that are focused on Jesus Christ and (b) a respect for those Christians with whom we disagree. It is out of those materials that we build a bridge that restores a sense of community. Only by restoring community do we become God's vision of the church.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Acts makes it obvious the church was what?
2. For decades, maybe longer, Christians have tended to do what?
3. When do some Christians see themselves as part of the church? When do they not?
4. Cite illustration #1 given. Cite illustration #2 given.
5. One can be what and have no association with what.
6. Some see the church as what?
7. In the last few decades, many Christians have lost what?
8. Discuss the transition in Acts 6.

9. Give the four things you were asked to note about Acts 6.
10. In an increasingly secular society, what do Christians/the church need to be?
11. It seems Christians spend more time in what than what?
12. What are the materials that can build a bridge across the gap of Christian disagreements?
13. What will be restored by this bridge?

Lesson Five

The “Church” and Names

Texts: see references in the lesson

The three branches of the American Restoration Movement have been big on having the correct name for the church. The earliest designation of the church (in the New Testament) evidently was the “way.” Depending on the translation used, Acts 9:2 refers to Jewish Christians who also attended the Jewish synagogue in Damascus as “the Way.” (The King James Version translates it “this way,” but the Revised Standard Version, the Today’s English Version, the New International Version, the Jerusalem Bible, the New King James Version, and the New American Standard Version all translate those Greek words “the Way.”) This designation occurs six times in Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), and it may refer to the way of salvation (consider Acts 16:17); the way of God (consider Acts 18:26), the way of the Lord (consider Acts 13:10; 18:25), etc. There is no clear New Testament statement of what “way” referred to.

Other than the undefined “way,” there is nothing that could honestly be called a name attached to “the church” in the New Testament. The most frequent designation of those who followed Jesus Christ was simply “the church.” There were the designations of “the churches of the gentiles” (Romans 16:4); the churches of Christ (Romans 16:16); the church of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 3:5, 15); the churches of God in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 2:14); churches of the saints (1 Corinthians 14:33); churches of Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1); churches of Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19); churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1); the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1); the church of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:23); and numerous references to churches in houses (consider Philemon 2). In all of the **of** references, please note this is not references to names, but declarations of possession. It is “the church (or churches) that is composed of or belongs to;” it is not a name.

Whereas name was and is an important consideration in many centuries, it was not an important consideration in the New Testament. This is not a suggestion that it is “wrong” to use any of the **of** designations in the capacity of a name for the church today. For such things as legal records and transactions often it is necessary to have and refer to a specific name for a congregation to have a legal entity. However, to affirm that one **of** designation is theologically sound, and other **of** designations are theologically unsound is questionable. To associate an exclusive name with the church Christ built is to do something that was not done in the New Testament. It is not wrong, but it is a legal necessity and not a biblical directive.

The emphasis in the New Testament is on *being* a follower of Jesus Christ so that the Christian manifests his (her) genuineness by motives and behavior rather than by depending on claims. The emphasis in the New Testament is on *what does a Christian look like* or *how does a Christian behave* rather than *what is the proper name for a follower of Jesus Christ*. Do remember that “church” is not used in the Old Testament. The Christian should never forget that there are many statements about Christian motivation and behavior in the epistles. Again, if you are a Christian, the emphasis is on *what you are* instead of *what you call yourself*. The notion, “If I call myself the ‘correct’ name that I am okay,” is not a New Testament concept.

Through the years of much of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century, there have been two basic approaches to being “the church” that Jesus Christ built. One could be called “the castle” mentality, and one could be called “the outreach” mentality. Basic to each is the view of people whose lives reject the influence of Jesus Christ (knowingly or unknowingly). These approaches to being “the church” that Jesus built answer the question of dealing with ungodly influences very differently.

Consider first “the castle” mentality. This considers all people outside “the church” as being intentionally ungodly. These people represent a bundle of ungodly influences. They are to be feared because they can corrupt “the church” easily. Thus, the safest thing to do is to build a wall around “the church,” close the gate, and protect “the church” from all harmful influences or harmful teachings. The primary emphasis is on protecting “the church.” What often happens is that Christian principles are reduced to lists of dos and don’ts and accepted (approved) procedures. A person is allowed into the congregation only if he (she) passes unwritten tests, believes accepted concepts, and behaves in ways that are acceptable to the Christian group. Those who enter “the church” are to be regarded with skepticism until those persons are given the group’s approval. The basic concern of this mentality is protection.

Consider “the outreach” mentality. This considers some people out of “the church” as being seekers. These people may be victims of ungodliness, but they are not in knowing and willful rebellion to God. They are teachable, but not easily identified at “first encounter.” Such people are not to be feared (the fear of terror) but given the hope that Jesus Christ provides. “The church” should teach them. The risk is ungodly influences, but these influences will be reversed through biblical teaching. All godly principles can be understood and applied by the individual. The primary emphasis of “the church” is on giving Jesus’ hope to people who are without hope. The objective of “the church” is to show Jesus’ hope to those who struggle to escape sin and to encourage those persons in their spiritual development. The basic awareness is that forgiveness is needed by all, not just those who are not yet in Christ.

There are numerous forms of “the castle” mentality and “the outreach” mentality. There are also numerous combinations of both mentalities. The question each seeks to answer is not easily answered. The answer often depends on (a) one’s concept of “the church,” (b) one’s concept of the purpose of physical existence in Jesus Christ, and (c) one’s concept and definition of faith.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What was the earliest designation of “the church”? To what did that refer?
2. The many **of** references to the church are what and not intended as a what?
3. For what reason is a name of a congregation important to Christians today?
4. The emphasis of the New Testament is on what, not on what?
5. For several generations, the emphasis has been on some form of what two mentalities?
6. Discuss the concept of “the castle” mentality.

7. Discuss the concept of “the outreach” mentality.
8. Discuss the weaknesses and strengths of each concept.
9. Our answer to the question of dealing with ungodly influences often depends on what three concepts?

Lesson Six

Continuing Jesus Christ's Work in This World

Texts: see references in the lesson

The gospel of John gives significant emphasis to this: (a) Jesus came from God, and (b) Jesus' work/mission was determined by God, not by Jesus.

In regard to the fact that Jesus came from God, read the Gospel of John 1:14-18; John the baptizer's (Baptist) statement in 1:29-34; and also the conversation between Nathanael and Jesus in 1:49-51. John 3:16 speaks of God "giving" Jesus, and 1 John 4:9, 10 speaks of the giving of Jesus as a manifestation of God's love because God sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins. Jesus is spoken of as God's "sent" in passages such as John 3:34; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7:16-18, 28, 29, 33; etc. Note Jesus is presented as the unique son of God, the lamb of God, God's messenger, God's representative and spokesman, the one who explains God, and the one who will return to his sender, but never the one who is God's brother.

Jesus stressed the fact in John that he was God's spokesman who surrendered himself to God's will. Therefore God determined what Jesus said, what Jesus did, and the focus of Jesus' ministry. Consider statements in John declared by Jesus in 3:34; 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49, 50; 14:10; and 17:9-13. Paul wrote about Jesus' surrender to God (as an example of humility for the Christians at Philippi) and Jesus' glorification by God (as a declaration of the trustworthiness of God's assurances) in Philippians 2:5-11. Note Paul emphasized the significance of Jesus' name as the God-raised Christ -- to Christians, the resurrected Jesus is King. The position and work of a king was something the first-century Christians understood.

The study of how things will be after death or at the return of the resurrected Jesus is called **eschatology**. There is no clear, definite explanation of all eschatological matters given in one scripture in the Bible. Though some people are quite definite in their eschatological views, most of those views have selected a particular scripture or a specific hypothesis as a basis for their eschatological views.

The New Testament presents the resurrected Jesus as a king who ascends to a temporary rule of Lord at God's right hand (a place of great honor, but not on God's throne itself [Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 7:55, 56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22]). Jesus Christ rules now. His rule will continue as Lord until he defeats everything that opposes God. When that is accomplished, the resurrected Jesus will return all things to God (including himself) that God may rule as the all in all (see 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). At the moment Jesus is Lord as he continues to defeat God's enemies. After judgment is completed, God will rule.

Allow Jesus' last words to eleven of his twelve disciples [John 13:31-16:33] to emphasize his mission. In this conversation, Jesus (a) calls to God [14:1-3, 6]; (b) calls to God's work (values) [14:11, 12]; (c) calls to God's glorification [14:13; consider also 13:31-35]; (d) calls to obedience [14:15, 21, 23; 15:1-10]; and (e) calls to be witnesses for him [15:27]. These words were directed to the men he called, not to us. We cannot be the kind of disciples in the same sense

as were these men Jesus personally selected. You are challenged to see Jesus' mission in Jesus' last recorded conversation with these men—come to the Father; do the Father's work; bring glory to the Father; obey the teachings; and be witnesses to Jesus' identity.

Carefully note the context. Jesus came only to the Jewish people. There is very little evidence that Jesus traveled outside of Jewish territory—such trips were infrequent and brief. Very few gentiles benefited from Jesus' miraculous acts. Within 24 hours the religious leaders of the Jews will "manufacture" Jesus' death. The Roman soldiers actually killed Jesus after Pilates' (the Roman governor) condemnation of Jesus (see Matthew 27:22-26, 27-31; 33-36; Mark 15:10). Ironically, the people who were supposed to know God the best and who represented God to a nation were the people who insisted on Jesus' crucifixion.

The challenge confronting us is the challenge to continue Jesus' ministry 2000 years later. How do we do that? (a) We call people to God. (b) Those that come to God are urged to accept God's work in this world. If we accept the call to God, we live by (exist in) God's values. That means we have to know what God's values are and how to exhibit those values in the way we live. (c) We exist to give glory to God. God is not shamed by what we say or how we act. In fact, people who seek God or more likely to come to God if such people have contact with us. (d) We do not exist to tell others what to do, but to show others what to do. We do not exist to find fault with the lives of the ungodly and unrighteous, but we live to obey God. We do not seek to "earn" or "deserve" anything (there is nothing to earn or deserve), but we seek to show appreciation for what God through Jesus Christ has done for us. Jesus showed us how to surrender to God's will. By obeying Jesus, we yield to God's values. One of the ways we give expression to our love for God and for Jesus is by being obedient. (e) We can be witness. We cannot be witnesses of what we did not see. However, we can be witnesses of the way God has touched our lives, and the peace and joy God has brought us through Jesus. We can verify who Jesus is by the impact Jesus has on who we are.

For Thought and Discussion

1. The gospel of John gives emphasis to what two things?
2. The gospel of John presents Jesus as what six things?
3. The gospel of John never presents Jesus as what?
4. Jesus stressed the fact that he was God's spokesman who did what?
5. God determined what?
6. Basically, what is eschatology? One scripture does not clearly, definitely do what?
7. Most people who are definite about eschatological views do at least one of what two things?
8. The New Testament presents the resurrected Jesus as what? When and how long will he be that king?

9. What is John 13:31 to John 16:33?
10. List five things Jesus emphasized about his ministry.
11. Discuss the context of the conversation in the gospel of John.
12. What challenge confronts us?

Lesson Seven

Jesus and His Church

Texts: Matthew 16:13-20

Begin by conducting a brief review. (a) The word “church” (*ekklesia*) was not part of a specialized religious vocabulary that denoted a special spiritual emphasis in a Christian context. It was a common word that referred to any number of things that included non-religious usages. (b) The New Testament used the word to stress a concept, not an institution. The common meaning: the “called out.” The Christian concept: to be “in” but not to be “a part of.” Christians are “in” this physical world, but they are governed by God’s values expressed through Jesus Christ, not by the values of those who reject God. (c) For Christians, the word “church” should refer to people who are in Jesus Christ. “Church” refers to the community who exist in Jesus Christ. Acts declares “church” and people in Jesus Christ refer to the same spiritual reality. Thus, those who are in the church are God’s called out. We do not isolate ourselves from those who rebel against God, but live among them and seek to be a godly influence.

The context of the text: Jesus and his disciples were in the northernmost area of Galilee. In fact, there were more gentiles in this area than Jews. The area was more noted for idolatrous activity than the worship of Jehovah God. The area was north of the Sea of Galilee, acknowledged to be part of the headwaters of the Jordan River, and near Mount Hermon.

Jesus’ miracles and unusual teachings produced much discussion among the Jewish people. Whatever the discussion, Jesus had to be explained. The Jewish crowds had to explain how “this man” was able to do and say what he did and said. For the Jewish people, the explanation centered on Jesus’ identity—his identity was the how. Thus, Jesus asked what identity the Jewish crowds gave him. The disciples replied that the crowds thought he was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. (Those were not inferior identities—the Jewish people thought Jesus was sent by God!) Jesus then asked who the disciples thought he was. Peter responded immediately—he was the Christ, God’s son.

This statement’s significance is not focused on “the church,” but on Jesus’ identity. The emphasis is not on what he would build, but on who he was. (1) Jesus said Peter knew who he was through revelation from God. (2) Because of who he was, he would build his “called out.” (3) Death would not prevent him from producing his “called out,” and death would not conquer his “called out.” (4) Peter would play a unique role in Jesus’ producing his “called out.” (5) The disciples should not—at this time—reveal Jesus’ actual identity as the Christ. Saying that Jesus declared himself to be the Christ (the Jewish Messiah) at this time would not be helpful to Jesus’ ministry and mission.

Jesus’ connection to his “called out” is described as a head to a body (Jesus being the head, and those in Jesus Christ being the body) [Ephesians 1:22, 23; 4:15, 16; Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19], and as a husband to a wife in a flawless relationship [Ephesians 5:22-32]. In each analogy, Jesus is the protector who provides guidance for his “called out.”

Commonly today (and in past centuries), human emphasis tends to be on the church. The emphasis in the first century is on the identity of Jesus as the Christ (a Greek word) or the

Messiah (a Hebrew word). God had long promised Israel a Messiah (Christ). Israel expected a king (like David, not like Jesus) who would permanently deliver the physical nation of Israelites from foreign oppression. Jesus simply did not fit expectations. Jesus declared peace by surrender and joy through sacrifice and death. Paul urged the “called out” in Rome not to seek vengeance on enemies but to show kindness to those who opposed them (Romans 12:17-21). Israel was not an ancient nation, but the people of faith in Jesus who had been “called out” to Jesus, who entered Jesus, and who devoted themselves to God’s values (Romans 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7; 29; 6:12-16; Philippians 3:3). Peace and joy through surrender and death? Loving enemies? Conquering evil by doing good? Establishing God’s kingdom by refusing to take vengeance? Servants who did not fight to rescue their king? What kind of kingdom is that? Who would want to be king of such values? This is not at all what Abraham’s physical descendants had in mind! Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah God promised? An executed Savior? A resurrected Redeemer who rejoiced in his followers’ deaths? How was that physically any improvement over what Abraham’s physical descendants already experienced? Thus, many in first-century physical Israel said, “No thanks!” to Jesus. They wanted a physical king who would crush their enemies, release them from domination, and make other people fear them again!

Christians belong to a dying man who was made Savior by God. They conquer by doing good. They want a King who has power over death. Their hope is placed in Jesus’ resurrection and his promise of their resurrection. They live in physical surrender in search of a promised body that is not physical and cannot die. They endure the physical in anticipation of a life that cannot end when they live with an eternal God. They understand the resurrected Jesus is Lord! He is King! He, by God’s acts, is the promised Christ! They understand that they are God’s Israel! Faith in the resurrected Jesus made them Abraham’s descendants. God’s promises are theirs! They exist to be Jesus’ called out! Without the resurrected Jesus, the church and Christianity are nothing.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Give three things to be remembered in a brief review.
2. What is the context of the text, Matthew 16:13-20?
3. Jesus’ miracles and unusual teachings produced what among the Jewish people? Why?
4. Who did the Jewish people say Jesus was? Was that a compliment?
5. Who did Peter say Jesus was?
6. The text does not focus on what, but on what?
7. Give a five point summary of the text (given in the lesson).
8. Jesus connection to his “called out” is described as what two things? In each illustration/analogy, Jesus is what two things?

9. Commonly today (and in past centuries), the emphasis tends to be given to what in the text?
10. Stated in a simple statement, why was Jesus not accepted by many Jews as their Messiah?
11. Many in Israel rejected Jesus because he did not do what three physical things?
12. Why do Christians live in physical surrender and service?

Lesson Eight

A Matter of Growth

Texts: Ephesians 2:11-18; 4:1-7; Hebrews 5:11-6:8

Humans develop. That is such a common understanding that most of the time we assume everyone knows this. After birth, there is infancy, toddler status, childhood, adolescence, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults. We even acknowledge the divisions in our efforts to educate. When I was young, there was elementary, junior high, and high school. In time, that was not enough, so there was kindergarten, elementary, junior high, and high school. Then there was pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, primary, middle school, and high school. Then there were additional remedial classes and special classes. That does not even acknowledge the college and university divisions of pre-graduate, graduate, and post-graduate classes, or acknowledge the divisions in trade schools. The point is not the fact that different classes exist, but that we grasp there are different levels of development.

Just as there are different levels of maturity in physical development, there are different levels of maturity in spiritual development. Peter spoke of spiritual newborn babes in 1 Peter 2:2 with the instruction to long for the pure milk of the word that they might grow in respect to salvation. Paul said to the Christians at Ephesus that unity of faith, the knowledge of the son of God, spiritual maturity, and the fullness of the stature of Christ were companions. He urged those Christians not to be children who were easily influenced by evil or deceived by human trickery. He said they should grow in all aspects into Christ, and that this individual development would result in the church's growth and building up in love (Ephesians 4:13-16). Paul instructed Christians at Corinth (in regard to the Spirit's work) not to think like children—be infants in their knowledge of evil, but be mature in their spiritual thinking (1 Corinthians 14:20). He told the same church in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 that spiritual maturity could be physically destructive. Paul told the Christians at Colossae that his objective in Christ was to present every person (to God) as complete in Christ (Colossians 1:28). Epaphras prayed that the Christians at Colossae would stand perfect (stand firm as spiritually complete or mature) in assurance of all of God's will (Colossians 4:12). The spiritual destructiveness of a refusal to seek spiritual maturity is declared in Hebrews 5:11-6:11.

These emphases are focused in this lesson on this truth: the person in Christ should expect to develop from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. No one, not even the Jew who was devoutly committed to scripture, was spiritually born fully mature in Christ. There were different growth rates, and different develop rates. For example, some quickly understood there was one God, and some did not (see 1 Corinthians 8), some quickly understood there was no dietary code and no ritual days, and some did not (see Romans 14:1-15:6). Some understood that spirituality was more than a matter of enforced control, and some did not (see 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

In every living congregation (unless it is extremely small) there will be groups of differing levels of spiritual growth and maturity. There will be those who come from families with a history of spiritual involvement, and those who come from zero history of spiritual involvement. There will be those with knowledge of "how we do things," and those who do not grasp at all "why we do that." There will be those with an extensive knowledge of biblical background, and those with no background at all. There will be those with extensive knowledge of scripture, and those with

limited knowledge of scripture. There will be those who know the congregation's vocabulary, and those who are confused by the congregation's vocabulary. There will be those who give a "book, chapter, and verse" but are inaccurate in their understanding of what the "book, chapter, and verse" declares, and those with an accurate grasp of the concepts of scripture. There will be those who oversimplify everything, and those who understand that the study of scripture involves numerous complexities.

To illustrate the truth of the existence of these spiritual maturity levels, take the time to trace your spiritual development from baptism to your present moment of spiritual existence. What did you understand spiritually when you were baptized? Did everyone you knew have your same understanding when they were baptized? What did you "know" the Bible said in spiritual infancy that you later learned was not in scripture? What in your spiritual childhood did you regard a "big deal" that you now know was purely a family preference? What in spiritual adolescence did you think was "really unimportant" that now in spiritual maturity you realize is of basic importance? If you now understand your spiritual concepts have grown and developed as a result of your understanding of scripture, do you now shudder when you realize that in past ignorance you influenced congregational policy and helped choose congregational leadership? In that flashback, consider a question: Do you think you can now stop spiritually growing and developing?

Consider a mystery from God: God can take all those groups and accomplish His purposes. Never did God give any human or group of humans the job of determining who is and is not spiritually mature. That is God's job alone! All of us have the same job—giving diligence to preserve (despite the groups!) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

To see the urgency of that challenge, read Ephesians 2:11-18. Though Jewish Christians and gentile Christians did not—in the matter of groups—understand the peace God created in Jesus Christ, though they did not understand God's reconciliation that He brought into existence through Jesus Christ, and though they did not understand that God through Christ had made Jewish Christians and gentile Christians into one "new man," God through Christ already had done all of that! God, in all their differences, had made them one body through the cross. God already had destroyed the enmity that used to separate them! Their responsibility: begin acting in accordance and acceptance of what God through Christ already had done! Their responsibility was NOT to argue about their differences, but to act in faith in what God through Jesus Christ already had done.

The problem facing us Christians, the church, today continues to be a "faith in what God did in Christ" problem. The root of our divisions often is more of a faithless "us" problem rather than a "God" problem. God did it; we need to believe it. Asking our permission was not God's approach to our pressing need to find peace with those in Christ who are not identical to us.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Humans do what physically and spiritually? Give an illustration.
2. There are different levels of what?

3. The person in Christ should expect what?
4. What will exist in most living congregations? Illustrate that truth.
5. What mystery of God is considered in this lesson?
6. Discuss Ephesians 2:11-18 in regard to what God did through Jesus Christ that those Christians did not grasp.
7. What is the problem facing Christians/the church today?

Lesson Nine

Hard Concepts (part 1)

Texts: Acts 15:1-21; 1 Corinthians 8; Romans 14:1-15:6

There exist some biblical concepts that Christian people, the church, find to be “hard concepts.” The concepts are hard for Christians, the church, to accept for numerous reasons. (a) One has been the conviction held by many that the church can know all God’s thoughts and emphases, and in that knowledge be correct about everything. (b) Another has been the fracturing of the restoration movement into the Church of Christ, the Christian Church, and The Disciples of Christ. Each of those segments of the American Restoration Movement has within it additional emphases. The unity movement fractured into segments, and each of those segments has significant fractures. (c) Another has been the difficult challenge of distinguishing between our preferences (which it is okay to have) and God’s commands (which are binding on Christians). The spiritual danger arises when people seek to make personal preferences divine commands or standards for faith in Christ. To prefer is one thing; to demand of others is quite another. (d) Another is an assigned meaning to a scripture that does not consider context or the author’s point. Such offenses were encouraged by adopting the “proof text” method of biblical interpretation. Basically this method authoritatively validated a concept by (1) saying, “It is in the Bible!” and (2) declaring a “proof text” with little or no concern for the author’s point.

These reasons are not all the reasons for Christians, the church, finding some biblical concepts difficult. Nor are all the concepts in the next lesson all the “hard concepts.” The intended challenge of this lesson: to make you think. The challenge is based on the conviction that thinking produces understanding, thinking and understanding produce faith, and faith is the fundamental motive for serving God and His purposes. Christians are not to be motivated by loyalty to the past, but by faith in God and surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ. The challenge is NOT to reduce scripture and the pursuit of salvation to a series of rules, but to see that scripture and the pursuit of salvation are centered in trusting God—a trust we know as faith.

If you are tempted to believe that understanding spiritual truth is simple, consider an illustration based on a common Church of Christ commitment. What do we wish to be? We wish to be Christians in the same sense that people were Christians in the New Testament. What do we wish to establish? We wish to establish the church as it existed in the New Testament. How do we wish to do those two things? Is the Christianity restored and first-century church established by following the Jewish or idolatrous culture of the first century? Which congregation becomes our guideline for restoration? The Jerusalem congregation who struggled to accept gentiles who were not Jewish proselytes? The Corinthian congregation who divided into groups based on teacher loyalty? The Galatian congregations who forsook Jesus Christ for Jewish practice?

The Ephesian congregation who did not understand that the dividing wall between Christians of Jewish and gentile background was destroyed by God through Jesus Christ? The Philippian congregation who had warring factions of influence? The Colossian congregation who found it difficult to abandon ungodly sexual involvements? The Thessalonian congregation who expected Jesus to return immediately?

We have buildings with varying degrees of conveniences—they had no buildings. We have classes and programs—they had few or none. We have printing with Bibles, study materials, libraries, concordances, dictionaries, and other study aides—they had no printing and few to no helps. We have computers and other office machines, secretarial help, staffs, and rooms used for varied purposes—they did not even know about most of those things.

Is restoration as simple as getting rid of things they did not have? Is restoration about first-century culture or about scientific discovery? Is restoration about God's purposes in Jesus Christ in today's world? How does getting rid of things that did not exist in the first century achieve God's purposes in today's realities? Does achieving God's purposes in Jesus Christ validate a means or method? Who decides "Yes" or "No"? Have we designed restoration to suit our preferences and objectives?

The point of the above is to challenge us to realize that pursuing divine truth is not a simple task, is not easily achieved, is not obvious to all, and is not delegated to any human or group of humans. Truth rests in God's hands and is expressed in Jesus Christ. It is pursued by knowing Jesus, not by simply declaring acceptance of the fact that Jesus lived as a man and was resurrected by God. We are Christ's church by being Christ's people in motive, in behavior, in word, and by being a people dedicated to God's purposes. One issue or one stance does not make anyone dedicated to restoration.

It is not so simple as being an "us" and a "them." Ultimately, restoration is not a human achievement based on human agreement. Ultimately, restoration is a divine gift. If Christ could make Christians "stand" (versus fall) who totally disagreed about sacred food, about holy days, and about drinking (all of Romans 14, but especially verses 3-6), the same Lord can make different Christian groups "stand." It results from the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, not from the pseudo-power of a congregation or group of congregations.

Perhaps the most serious spiritual matter is found in whom we condemn, not in whom we approve. May we never condemn someone in Christ when our Lord says "Yes!" If the Lord could make one body out of Jewish Christians (many we would consider legalists) and gentile Christians (many who thought idols represented living gods), He can make one body of us in our many disagreements. The root of the problem is not God's instructions. It is our demands.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Some biblical concepts are what?
2. Give the four reasons given in the lesson for some concepts being hard (difficult) concepts.
3. Are these reasons given as all the reasons?
4. What are we challenged to understand?
5. What two things do we wish to be/do?

6. What problems existed in congregations in the New Testament?
7. What do we have that they did not have?
8. Give some challenging questions that we can ask about restoration.
9. Pursuing divine truth is not what?
10. Ultimately, restoration is not what, but what?
11. What might be the most serious spiritual matter?

Lesson Ten

Hard Concepts (part 2)

Texts: see references in the lesson

This is a continuing lesson based on last week's thoughts and discussions. You are asked to remember that restoration (a) is not a simple commitment and (b) is not simply accomplished. The challenging concepts we face that are presented in this lesson are NOT presented as all the difficult concepts. There are additional thoughts that are a legitimate part of the discussion.

1. Hard concept one: God's thinking and actions are not like our thinking and actions.

Begin by reading Isaiah 55:8, 9; Romans 11:33-36; 1 Corinthians 3:19; Ephesians 3:8-10; and Colossians 2:8-15. The focus of these statements is that people do not think like God thinks and do not act like God acts. He does things that exceed our imagination.

Consider. God through Jesus Christ is patient and understanding in ways that surpass our patience and understanding. He accepts repentance that we would question. His joy is not in holding the transgressor accountable for his choices and deeds, but in forgiving the sinner for his mistakes. He shows mercy to people we would harshly condemn. He gives grace to those who do not "deserve" (???) grace. He does not save us to judge, but to serve and to "light the way." Have you read Romans 2:1-16 lately? Do not be like the first-century Jews who thought relationship with God was a matter of what one knew rather than a matter of what one did!

2. Hard concept two: He is thoroughly capable of being the God of diversity.

Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 10:23-33; Romans 14:1-12; and 1 Timothy 4:1-5. God could take Christians who came to opposite conclusions about eating meat sacrificed to idols, about holy days, etc. *because of faith in Jesus Christ* and accept each of them as He spiritually sustained each of them.

The foundation issue in being Christians was not agreement. The foundation issues were (a) to be as merciful to the Christian with whom you disagree as YOU wish to receive mercy from God, and (b) to know that you will explain your reasons for your conclusions TO GOD. Have you read Jesus' words in Matthew 6:1-18 lately?

3. Hard concept three: We do not have it all figured out.

Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 8:1-3; 3:18-23; 13:8-13; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; and 2 Timothy 2:14-19. It is extremely easy to revert to human reasoning and human perspectives. Once we do that, it is simple to substitute human perspectives for God's values.

From a human perspective, we can conclude we have God figured out. Consider Ephesians 2:11-22 as a sobering example.

The Jewish Christians versus the gentile Christians was a major, continuing problem in the church (among the Christians) of the first century. Jewish Christians did not see how idol worshipping gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jewish proselytes first. Gentile Christians could not understand why things in the church must follow Jewish ways and traditions. The welding of conflicting cultures into a people of one body in Jesus Christ often presented challenges that exceeded human tolerance.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is a good example. Neither gentle Christian nor Jewish Christian understood that God *already* had destroyed the dividing wall that separated the groups through all God achieved through Jesus' death and resurrection. Both groups acted as if the wall existed and was in place. Their misunderstanding determined their behavior. They acted as if the dividing wall existed *because* they did not comprehend the significance of Jesus being Christians' peace. A failure to understand *what God already had done in Jesus Christ* resulted in Christian opposition to divine reconciliation! Their failure to understand what God did in Jesus' death and resurrection resulted in Christians opposing God's accomplishment! God made them one building, temple, even if they as Christians did not grasp what God did! The foundation of their failure was the failure to understand what God did in Jesus Christ!

4. Hard concept four: Toleration of Christian disagreement is godly.

Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 2:1-5; 8; 10:23-33; Romans 12:3-16, and Romans 14:1-15:7.

Things to consider and note: (a) New Testament encouragements to avoid divisions were addressed to divisions within *congregations*. (b) The responsibility of the strong Christian was to be respectful of the weak Christian (weak Christians are not expected to remain weak indefinitely or to use claims of weakness to exercise control over other Christians). (c) All Christians exist to give glory to God in all circumstances.

God takes no joy in the failure of any Christian. God takes joy in the salvation of each Christian. Read Hebrews 10:32-36 in consideration of the context of the book.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What two things are you asked to remember about restoration?
2. Hard concept one is what?
3. On what is the focus of the readings?
4. Illustrate that God's thinking and acts are not like ours.
5. What is hard concept two?
6. How can God take Christians who reach conflicting conclusions and make them one?

7. The foundation Christian issue is not what? Instead, two foundation issues are what?
8. What is hard concept three?
9. What is extremely easy to do? If that occurs, what is simple?
10. What was a major, continuing problem in the church of the first century?
11. Discuss Ephesians 2:22.
12. What is hard concept four?
13. What three things are you asked to consider and note?

Lesson Eleven

Contrast: Christian Identity Concept

Text: Galatians 5:16-26

Galatians was written by Paul to “the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:1, 2). It is the only one of his letters to the churches that begins by immediately going to the problem instead of providing encouragement. Typically, Paul wrote why he gave thanks for a congregation and often spoke of praying for the congregation. However, in his letter to the multiple congregations in the province of Roman Galatia, Paul went straight to his dissatisfaction with these congregations. He was upset because they forsook Jesus Christ for a Jewish emphasis.

Most of the other congregations to whom Paul wrote were having spiritual growth problems or problems that arose from failures to understand. The Galatian congregations were having problems that were the product of deserting Jesus Christ! The desertion was deliberate, not the result of a failure to understand. It was a matter of choice, not a matter of ignorance of who Jesus Christ was or what God achieved in Jesus Christ (read chapter 3). Though it was not a total abandonment of Jesus Christ, it was a declaration that it took Jesus Christ plus an appropriate acceptance of Judaism to provide gentiles salvation.

The conflict between Jewish perspective and gentile perspective is much in evidence in Galatians. Thus, the gentile Christians—under the pressure and influence of the Judaizing teachers—were convinced that salvation (a) came through the nation of Israel and (b) included some non-negotiable Jewish rites such as physical circumcision and some Jewish traditions. The result was this understanding: Jesus Christ of himself was insufficient for salvation. Who the Judaizing teachers were and where they came from is debated. Their influence in Galatian congregations after Paul left is unquestionable.

The “believability” of the Judaizing teachers’ message to those gentile converts can be approached in numerous ways: (a) God’s past involvement in Israel; (b) the unique things Israel possessed (the Law, scripture, the covenant, their prophets, etc.); (c) proselytism; (d) the questionable background of Paul and his apostleship; etc. Whatever approach these people used, they convinced the gentile Christians of Galatia that it took more than Jesus Christ to produce gentile salvation. The “more” was supplied by Judaism.

Interestingly, the influence of these people was so significant that Paul had to defend both himself and the message he preached to the Galatians about Jesus Christ.

Near the end of the letter, Paul reminded the Galatian Christians of who they were in Jesus Christ. He provided this reminder in two ways in chapter five: (a) through a call to freedom in Jesus Christ and (b) through an interesting contrast in 5:16-26. Please focus on the contrast.

To Paul, the contrast is between the flesh and the Spirit. Those two terms likely mean little to most of us. It is a contrast of the results of a person investing life in the physical things that oppose God and the spiritual things that come from God. These people in their pre-Christian past focused their lives on the “flesh” or the physical things that opposed God. It had only been

since they came to and entered Jesus Christ that they focused on the “Spirit” or the spiritual things that come from God.

Notice some things about the general contrast. (a) Notice things that we would regard as spiritual considerations—idolatry and sorcery—are considered by Paul as things of the flesh. Why? Such things (1) focused on an attempt to use the physical to manipulate the divine; (2) in many forms encouraged physical indulgence; and (3) opposed the existence and the purposes of the only true, living God.

(b) Notice that the other manifestations listed fall into two general groups: (a) attempts to control people and (b) attempts to indulge the physical senses. The listing provides us a good insight into the values/focus of non-Christian people in the Roman world of Galatia in the first century.

(c) Notice that the focus of life must change when a person decides to be a Christian. It is not just a change in the person’s belief system, but it is a change in behavior. The change in one’s new belief system is reflected in one’s behavior. That change in belief and behavior is the difference between inheriting (an inheritance is a gift) and not inheriting. One’s actions cannot be governed by a fleshly focus and that person inherit God’s kingdom. (The Jewish concept of heaven or afterlife was more a kingdom concept than the Christian mansion or palace concept.)

(d) Notice that the values of being a spiritual person did not violate Jewish law. One could bear the Spirit’s fruit and not violate or be in opposition to Jewish law. The values of Christianity did not place the Galatian Christian in opposition to Jewish law—in fact those values fulfilled God’s intent in the law the Jews kept.

(e) Notice this transition is described as a crucifixion. Remember, crucifixion was a horrible form of execution. First, the transition is described as a death to the undesirable—it was not a “back and forth” transition. Second, crucifixion was a slow form of dying, a process—not an instant occurrence. They needed to understand that this transformation took time in its human expression. Third, it was a decidedly un-Jewish event that transforms into Jesus Christ’s values and focus, which are God’s values and focus.

(f) Because it was a crucifixion, it was a transition designed to allow the participant to share in Jesus’ death. Through death, Jesus made a major transition. Through death to the fleshly focus, the Christian makes a major transition.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Paul begin his letter to the Galatians?
2. How is Galatians different from other letters Paul wrote to churches?
3. What problems did the other churches have? What was the Galatian churches’ problem?
4. Of what two things were these gentile Christians convinced?

5. What was the result of this understanding?
6. Give some possible reasons for these Christians finding the Judaizing message believable.
7. How significant was the Judiazers' influence in the Galatian churches?
8. What contrast did Paul make in Galatians 5?
9. What six things are you asked to note in Paul's contrast?

Lesson Twelve

Contrast: The Baggage Concept

Text: Ephesians 4:17-32

Years ago I worked first as a counselor then as a director for a Christian camp for many summers (a session per summer). When the camp first opened, campers brought themselves and their clothes—going to camp was “getting away from it all.” As time passed, campers brought more and more “things” with them. The camp board made rules about what a camper could and could not bring to camp. Then came the petitions. Every year the camp board was petitioned to allow campers to bring “this.” When my going to camp experiences ended, there was little difference between going to camp and moving! The campers’ baggage contained far more than clothes! Going to camp became “bringing it with you.”

There is a lot of parallel in the above illustration and the experience of entering the church. More and more people do not choose to enter the Christian community in order to leave the world. In fact, being an “official” part of the Christian community has less and less to do with the decision to “leave” anything. In too many people’s thinking, being a Christian has to do more with combining than leaving.

Whether we wish to admit it or not, all of us enter the Christian community with baggage from our past life and past experiences. Increasingly, local Christian communities become a strange combination of devotion to Jesus and baggage from people’s past. Increasingly, congregational confrontations, power plays, and divisions have more to do with the baggage people brought with them than devotion to Jesus Christ.

Attention is called today to a group of converts that brought a lot of baggage from their past into the church. They were suffering because of their baggage from the past. Bringing unchristian baggage into the church is not a new problem! It was a common problem 2000 years ago!

Begin by reading today’s text. Do this to have that scripture fresh in your mind as some things are called to your attention. Notice there was (a) a “before conversion” existence, (b) the understanding that formed their “reason for coming to Christ,” and (c) an “in Christ” behavior. Verses 17-19 speak of conditions in their pre-conversion existence. Verses 20-24 deal with the understanding of people who entered Christ. Verses 25-32 deal with the behavior they should have as people who belong to Christ. In these verses, there is the “what you were,” the “why you came to Jesus Christ,” and the “how you should act” as people who belonged to Christ.

Second, notice that coming to Christ involved a definite transition. There was the “old self” that was corrupted by the lusts of deceit which formed the spirit of their pre-conversion existence. Conversion occurred because they were renewed in the spirit of their mind. Because of what they learned about Jesus Christ, their thinking was changed. Because of this different way to understand existence, they were converted. The new existence created in the righteousness and holiness of truth was called the “new self.”

Third, notice that the reality of the existence of the “new self” was verified by the way they behaved. Pay particular attention to the contrast in behavior: old self—deceitful, new self—

truthful; old self—prolonged anger, new self—short-term anger; old self—stole in selfish greed, new self—earned to help the struggling; old self—destructive speech, new self—edifying speech; old self—enemy of God's influence, new self—helper of God's influence; and old self—ruled by negative emotions, new self—devoted to positive emotions. Why the transformation? They allowed God's behavior demonstrated in Christ to become their model.

Fourth, notice that not all their behavior has been transformed. A case could be made that this congregation had deceit problems, anger problems, stealing problems, speech problems, godly influence problems, and problems caused by negative emotions. It is entirely possible that Paul used these specific examples because these areas were trouble spots in their Christian community.

However, to be beyond speculation, consider verse 28. Some Christians in the Christian community were still stealing. Stealing was not a moral issue! It was a way of life! Perhaps it was like one place I lived—stealing from “the well-to-do” was not stealing, but a way for the less fortunate to share in the good fortune of someone who would not miss what was lost.

Take note of how Paul addressed the situation. He did not say, “You should know better than that!” which would not address the problem. He said that it was the nature of Christians to be helpers of those in need, not takers from others. Christians share! They help those in need! There is no need to fear violent acts from the man or woman in Christ!

Fifth, notice that the divine part of transformation is immediate. Forgiveness, redemption, and sanctification are immediate acts that occur when a person enters Christ. That is God's part. However, it takes some time to educate the person to act consistently with what God did for him (or her). To learn the behavior that is consistent with divine forgiveness, divine redemption, and divine sanctification takes time. The relevant question is “Is the person growing?” not “Has the person arrived?” Arrival involves (1) a subjective human expectation, (2) the person's past, and (3) what society told the person was okay prior to the person's conversion to Christ.

Never allow your baggage to provide justification for ungodly behavior. Let Christ be your example. Let God in Christ be your model.

For Thought and Discussion

1. In too many people's thinking, being a Christian has more to do with what than what?
2. All of us enter the Christian community with what? Where did we get it?
3. Increasingly, what three things have more to do with baggage than devotion to Jesus Christ?
4. What five things are you asked to note?
5. How did Paul address the situation?
6. What part of transformation is immediate? What part requires time?

7. Arrival involves what three things?
8. Christians should never allow baggage to do what?
9. In behavior matters, who is the Christian's example/model?

Lesson Thirteen

Contrast: The Transition Concept

Text: Colossians 3:1-13

Colossians begins as a letter from Paul “to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae ...” (Colossians 1:2). Paul began with an encouragement, an enumeration of the things Christ did for them, recognition of Jesus Christ’s significance, and a declaration of his (Paul’s) attitude and purpose. Evidently, many of them had not personally seen Paul (2:1). Paul wanted to encourage them to realize the value of their relationship with Christ.

Today’s text began with a conclusion indicated by the “if then” that was based on their relationship with Christ. Paul would encourage them to understand that their relationship with Christ produced the benefits that determined who they were and their life focus.

If (in the sense of because) they accepted as true (correct) that they had been resurrected with Christ, that resurrection with Christ should produce specific results in their lives. (1) They should seek the things where Christ is. The values that produced Christ’s enthronement by God should be the values that guided their attitudes and behaviors. (2) They should set their minds on a spiritual focus, not on a physical focus. Paul was not suggesting that they were not physical beings who existed in a physical world. Nor is Paul suggesting that just because something is physical it is bad (or good). He said their lives had to have a focus, a reason for existing. That focus should not be defined by the physical realities that surrounded them but by the spiritual realities that surrounded physical existence. Why? (a) You died (a chosen redirection of life) to physical reasons for living because you chose to place life in Christ. (b) Since living in Christ now defines what your life is about, you exist for Christ’s return, not for the present.

What followed is a contrast. Notice the contrast exists (a) because Jesus was raised from the dead, and (b) because they were who they were because of Jesus’ resurrection. God’s resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the contrast. (We need to produce a greater awareness that Jesus’ resurrection is the foundation for who we are and how we look at life.) Do not ignore the “therefore” that begins verse five. Paul gave them the contrast because Jesus was resurrected and their life was shaped and focused by Jesus’ resurrection.

Paul’s contrast was constructed on the concept of transformation. Basically transformation declares, “I was that before entering Christ,” but, “Now I am this because of entering Christ.” The “that” and the “this” are in distinct contrast. The life idol worshippers lived before entering Christ and the life lived by the person converted to Christ were in distinct contrast. There was a distinct difference in the way divinity was viewed, the way the person drew near divinity, the definitions of morality, the view of suitable behavior, and the understanding of appropriate motives.

The contrast between life in Christ and idolatrous life was a vivid contrast. Before conversion sexual indulgence; acts motivated by greed; control of others through anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech; and deceit were appropriate behaviors. After conversion, Christians understood that such behaviors had eternal negative consequences. The Christian

understood that these behaviors (a) were negative because they were in opposition to God's values, (b) invited divine wrath on a person (the person was responsible for evil committed instead of receiving divine forgiveness), and (c) in no way characterized the life of a person who belonged to Christ.

When a person chooses to live in Christ, he (or she) chooses to become the "new self." This new self has been "renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him." Notice here Paul declared the knowledge that focused a person on physical existence to be a false knowledge. It pretended to know because it focused on what was physically seen. Genuine knowledge focused on the spiritual—a reality based on Jesus' resurrection. The foundation of true knowledge rested in the human understanding that there is a Creator and we humans are His created.

In Christ, the Creator erased the significance of human distinctions through Jesus' resurrection. There was no longer Greek (here civilized non-Jew) versus Jew, or circumcised versus uncircumcised (another way of saying Jew versus the rest of people), or barbarian including the Scythian (despised as the uneducated and inarticulate with the Scythian being the lowest form of barbarians), or slave and free—all human distinctions were erased by God through Christ. One of their challenges as Christians, the church, was to destroy human distinctions—offer genuine oneness in Christ to everyone.

The contrast between Christian and non-Christian is seen in verses 12 and 13. Christians were a kind, compassionate, gentle people who were patient with the mistakes of others. They acted in love and forgiveness rather than recognizing human distinctions. Their values came from the Lord, not from people.

Why was there a difference between those in Christ and those not? Transformation! God through Christ enabled those who placed confidence in what God did in Jesus to be freed from their past. God enabled people to be entirely different. As those freed people, they encouraged others to escape their past by placing confidence in Jesus. Being a Christian is more than associating with Christians—it is being transformed through Christ!

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Colossians begin? How did Paul begin?
2. Explain the significance of the "if then."
3. Resurrection with Christ should produce what specific results in their lives?
4. The contrast existed for what two reasons?
5. Paul's contrast was constructed on what concept? Explain what transformation is.
6. Before conversion to Christ, what were considered some appropriate behaviors?

7. Name three things the Christian understood about these behaviors.
8. When a person chose to become a Christian, what did he choose to become? What renewed the new self?
9. Discuss what God erased in Christ.
10. Describe what first-century Christians were to be.
11. What did God enable people in Christ to do?